Xine Yao / August 13, 2019 / Uncategorized

# **Midsommar:** The Horrors of White Sympathy

"I hope the people of colour don't die first," I whispered to my friend at the start of Ari Aster's folk horror film *Midsommar*. Of course, in the end, they unsurprisingly do. And yet, Aster's striking decision to present these usual terrors in the glaring Scandinavian sunshine offers a twist on the typical racialized tropes of horror film.

The near constant brightness on screen makes the viewer's eyes burn from the Aryan blonde uniformity of the commune clad in pure white. The horror cliché of people of colour dying first is thrown, to paraphrase Zora Neale Hurston, against this sharp white background. *Midsommar* presents us with the spectacle of the horrors of white supremacy — in all its gendered, psychological complexity — in literal broad daylight.

A take on the horror subgenre of hapless tourists and villainous locals, *Midsommar* is particularly unsettling because the carnage catalyzes a young white woman's journey from alienation to belonging. "I lost my parents too," says Pelle to Dani (Florence Pugh), the protagonist traumatized by the sudden deaths of her family. He is the first person to offer sympathy for her loss other than her lackluster boyfriend. We may very well be skeptical about the sincerity of this gesture since Pelle then lures his friends to their doom in rural Sweden. "I know what you're going through, Dani," he says later when the commune's grisly Midsommar rituals have begun to unfold. Perversely, his sense of shared identification seems genuine.

During the drive to Hälsingland the camera rotates us vertically on the road, a disorienting signal that we are entering a white nationalist's Nordic neomedievalist wet dream. Not only are runes part of everyday life for the Härga commune, we discover that they practice gory rituals like the 'blood eagle' and *ättestupa* that are now considered anachronistic distortions by medievalist scholars. This neo-pagan commune is at first characterized through fantasies of idyllic primitivism: organic food, everything handcrafted, the economy sustained by selling artisanal goods – and the big happy white family, complete with gamboling children amid profusions of flowers, at its heart.

These pleasures of a white supremacist nostalgia for an imagined past are advertised to Dani, but she is most moved by the psychological comfort of this social vision. These people, Dani believes, *understand* her. Her boyfriend Christian, on the other hand, dismisses her feelings and gaslights her concerns. By contrast, when Dani collapses sobbing she is embraced by a group of women who mimic her every heave and cry. Indeed, during scenes of death and sex

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we see the commune echo the feelings of their own in ways grotesque and almost bathetic. According to philosopher Adam Smith, sympathy is the use of imagination to place oneself into another's situation. And by the end, fair Dani accepts her place among the Härga, crowned as the May Queen.

Dani's ascension via sympathetic identification is explicitly posed against those left behind. Dani is at first worried about the disappearance of Simon and Connie, a Black and South Asian British couple invited by their own Swedish friend. They are the only characters distressed by the festival's opening ritual suicides. Although they attempt to leave, these Londoners are the first to die; in a twist on the typical racialized fears about the dangers of the metropolis, it is the characters of colour whose cosmopolitan openmindedness to a foreign culture endangers them. Whatever sympathy Dani had for them soon disappears with her willing assimilation into the Härga.

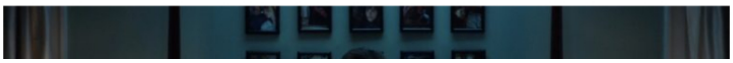
Josh, the remaining character of color, however, is unperturbed by the violence. Christian and his friends are anthropology PhDs whose ethnographic curiosity numbs any misgivings to the point of parody. For Josh, who is African American, the festival is the focus of his dissertation; in fact, he knew the suicides would happen and welcomed this new data. Christian, too, eventually latches onto the ceremonies since he had been procrastinating on his dissertation proposal.

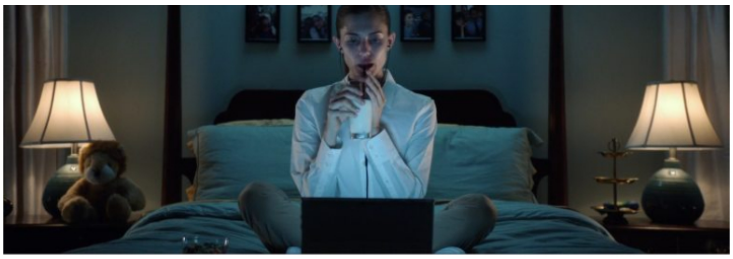
Josh and Christian vie for the opportunity to rationalize the commune's violence into knowledge and careers. In the end, Pelle grants Christian joint permission to study the commune, despite Josh's protests. Although he is the most devoted academic of the group Josh gets his research "scooped" by his mediocre white friend under the guise of collaboration. Josh's murder might be seen as punishment for a violation of fieldwork ethics — he photographs sacred texts — but also a reminder that studying whiteness requires, well, being critical of whiteness. First they came for Simon and Connie, then they came for Josh who doesn't even try to get out.

But white characters are killed by the commune too! one might point out. If anything, those deaths highlight the violent construction of hegemonic whiteness. Boorish William dies for pissing on the hallowed tree, disrespecting the ancestors and their history. Christian is useful to the commune for his sperm, climaxing in a hilariously discomforting scene of him humping one of the girls surrounded by a chorus of women who moan with her in sympathy. Nevertheless, he too must die: he is sewn into the skin of a bear, a morbid caricature of a reductive call for a return to nature. For the final sacrifice he is burned alive  along with two male volunteers from the commune and the prepared corpses of the other tourists. Their screams are mirrored by the wailing symphony of the Härga community that bears witness.

In stark comparison Josh's dying grunts are met with silence. The camera lingers on this agonizing shot of the only death to happen at night, underscoring that Black and brown suffering is not deemed worthy of sympathy.

In the final moment of *Midsommar* we see Dani's expression change from tears to smiles as she watches the blaze that counts her boyfriend among its victims. As an appropriate revenge for his gaslighting she had ordered that he be set on actual fire. Some view this conclusion as a quasi-feminist triumph. Throughout the movie we are given excruciating closeups of Dani's face, a fine display of Florence Pugh's acting abilities. The feelings of white womanhood are given center stage and eventual catharsis.





*Get Out* director Jordan Peele has high praise for *Midsommar* and I cannot help but compare Dani to the villainous Rose. The Americans are drawn to and consumed by this fantasy of whiteness, but Dani is the one who joins the Aryan commune. To rejoice in this finale is to accept that Black and brown people must be sacrificed as offerings for a white feminist reclamation of self and belonging. *Midsommar* confronts us with this question: where do our sympathies lie?

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1

Bonnie Scheeler on August 13, 2019 at 2:11 pm Reply

Um. . . Jack? Did you mean Christian? That's a pretty important detail, both for accuracy and symbolism.

2

Sarah and Sarah on August 14, 2019 at 9:09 am Reply

Thanks! Corrected!

3

Andrea Deagon on August 13, 2019 at 7:36 pm Reply

One of the most thoughtful and best written interpretations I've seen. Two comments on where my feelings diverged. As an audience member, I found Josh's death, with the skinned face mocking him, horrifying, and felt it was filmed in a way that encouraged us to identify with him as he died. I also found Dani's final acceptance of the cult horrifying, not only because of the moral choices she makes, but also because her loss of agency and her reliance on an unquestioning group-mind are basically the destruction of any meaningful selfhood – and therefore the exact opposite of feminist.

4

HGK on August 14, 2019 at 6:21 am Reply

This entire article resonated with my thoughts so well. Each point made felt succinct and pinpointed. I could read this again, just for the pragmatism of it all. Thank you for the fearless dissection of this film.

The below quote is one of my favorites from this; an alternative synopsis of the film with your intention in mind,

"carnage catalyzes a young white woman's journey from alienation to belonging."

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